

Exploring the Roles of Youth in Community Programming and Their Connections to Positive Youth Development and Involvement in Community

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Youth Voice and Program Development

Youth in low-income urban settings face a variety of challenges, or risk factors. These youth often lack resources to meet their personal and professional goals, and have higher levels of exposure to violence, crime, and substance abuse, among other risky behaviors, when compared with youth who reside in other areas (Farrell & Johnson, 2005). In addition, in the US, 26% of youth are unsupervised in the afternoon hours directly after school, which are also the most critical hours for risky behavior and juvenile crime (After School Alliance, 2009).

Research has demonstrated that applications of the positive youth development (PYD) model have immense potential to build protective factors against these risks that youth face, connect them to meaningful relationships, and enhance their overall growth and development (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007). These PYD experiences can occur in the form of youth organizations or broad level community projects, which may expose youth to civic engagement, community service, and decision making/planning processes. On a surface level, programs like these provide a safe place for youth to go after school and positive adult role models, mitigating the risk associated with youth being ‘on their own’ during after school hours. On a deeper level, these programs provide opportunities for youth to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and psychologically (Harrington, Sheehan & Blyth, 2011; Brennan et al., 2007).

However, many PYD programs, though well-intentioned, miss a critical aspect of serving youth on that deeper level: the incorporation of “youth voice”. Prioritizing youth voice in organizational settings means that youth are actively involved in decision making processes, and adults intentionally seek opportunities to hear about the perspectives of youth (Fox, Tarifa, & Machtmes, 2008). Unfortunately, the inclusion of youth voice is rare. In community settings, youth are often viewed as problems to be fixed, rather than resources to be invested in (Royce, 2009). As a result, strategic planning and change processes that happen in communities are most often adult-led, with little to no influence of youth voice. The same phenomena are observed in many youth organizations as well, as program leaders strive to help youth with the issues they face, but in doing so, fail to consider the value of youths’ own perspectives and contributions in addressing these issues.

This default mentality, however, is problematic for both youth and communities. Community development is a complex process which involves all subgroups of a community/organization, and the exclusion of any of those perspectives (including youth) creates an inaccurate representation of the issues, assets, and opportunities that exist in the community (Wang & Burris, 1997; Brennan, et al., 2007). It also deprives youth of important opportunities to gain access to resources, connections, and experiences that can help with their continued growth and development.

This study sought to flip this typically adult-led strategy by intentionally involving youth in the development of a program, with the idea that youth would thrive as a result of their empowerment, and the community would benefit from the unique and valuable contributions that youth make when given a platform to share their ideas. Specifically, researchers were looking to implement a youth program in the Weinland Park community with emphasis on the 4-H model. We worked closely with OSU Extension professionals who had observed a gap in programming for youth in the area and sought to learn more about the interests and goals, role models, future aspirations, community perceptions, and program development ideas directly from the youth that lived there.

The goal was to learn more about the needs and goals of youth in that specific community, as well as the unique perceptions youth have that differ from those held by adults. This information will be reported back to OSU Extension professionals and used to influence future opportunities available to youth in the area. We hope that the design of this study will create insight about what can be accomplished in a community when youth are given a voice and a priority, and that findings will spark more long term collaborations between OSU Extension and Ohio State's Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership that will benefit youth in Weinland Park.

The Changing Landscape of 4-H

4-H is an international youth organization based on the theory of PYD that focuses on mentorship and hands-on learning. 4-H is traditionally considered a rural youth organization, but in recent years the development of urban 4-H clubs has been on the rise. In 2017, 4-H membership in the state of Ohio was approximately 503,826 youth. Of that number, 46% of Ohio youth involved in 4-H lived in urban communities (Ohio State University Extension, 2017). As cities grow and club compositions change, programming needs for 4-H members continue to evolve.

Recently, one way that 4-H has worked to fill the programming gap for urban youth is through SPIN, or special interest, clubs. 4-H SPIN clubs differ from traditional 4-H programs, as activities are group based, focus on a particular content area that is of interest to youth, and typically occur during after-school hours. This caters to the unique needs in urban communities, as after school hours are critical hours for youth to be involved in activities that reduce risk. In addition, the group activities implemented in SPIN clubs move beyond individualized, agriculture-based projects and allow youth to explore a variety of new content areas, while also developing pro-social skills through collaboration with their mentors and peers. Researchers and Extension partners feel that the 4-H SPIN model has potential for success in the Weinland Park community.

Another unique aspect/challenge is that in traditional rural settings, families are familiar with the concept of 4-H across generations, but in rural settings, the program's reputation is much less established. This leads to the challenge of creating buy-in for youth in urban communities. When youth and families are unfamiliar with the program and the potential benefits it offers for young people, they're less likely to commit themselves to it early on. In our work with Weinland Park, this sparked some interesting questions about embedding 4-H programming in existing youth programs in the area. Through our conversations with key community leaders, we learned that programs like Boys & Girls Club and Godman Guild (career preparation/trade skills program)

already exist in Weinland Park and are common after school activities for youth. Although we feel that the 4-H model differs from other programs and has the potential to add unique value to the lives of youth, we recognize that partnering with these existing organizations and embedding 4-H into their programming would allow us to expose youth to 4-H concepts, reach youth where they are, and start to build interest until a stand-alone 4-H program can be established.

Conceptual Framework (PYD & “Sparks”)

A key component of PYD is the developmental assets framework, outlined by Peter Benson and the Search Institute in Minnesota. It suggests that assets serve as tools and protective factors for youth, and that youth move toward thriving behaviors as they acquire more assets (Benson, 2007). Empowerment and involvement in decision-making are two critical aspects of PYD, and both directly relate to youth having a voice in their communities and organizations. As youth are empowered and involved, they improve in self-efficacy, self-determination, belief in the future, and more (Catalano et al., 2004). In addition, PYD suggests that as youth gain protective factors, they also increase their resilience, or their ability to productively respond to challenging situations and risk (Catalano et al., 2002).

Many youth models focus on “at-risk” youth, serving only those who are experiencing a particularly high level of risk factors. PYD, however, is a framework which aims to serve *all* youth, with the understanding that each child has needs and can benefit from positive youth development, regardless of the risk and protective factors they currently experience (Jesnon & Bender, 2014). PYD is a strengths-based approach that emphasizes the talents, skills, and perspectives that youth bring to the table rather than focusing on their deficits (Benson, 2007). It recognizes that youth still have needs but uses their strengths as a starting point to help them move forward, which empowers them to become active participants in their own development (Benson, 2007).

PYD also says that youth have “sparks”, or things that they’re passionate about and love to do, and that when youth are engaged in activities involving their sparks, they experience immense growth and development, and their higher-level engagement leads them to excel (Scales, 2010). However, according to a study done by the Search Institute, only about a third of youth feel that adults understand their passions and interests and help develop these “sparks” in their lives, further emphasizing the need for youth voice in programming (Scales, 2010). We sought to learn more about the sparks that youth in Weinland Park have in order to inform programming and enhance their development.

Finally, PYD takes a holistic approach to development, which is also sometimes referred to as “person in environment”, meaning that it views youth as complex individuals that are impacted by a variety of social and environmental influences, as well as risk and protective factors (Catalano et al., 2002).

Another concept which played a major role in guiding this process was the community capitals framework. There are 7 types of community capital: human, social, physical, cultural, financial, environmental, and political (Green & Haines, 2012). Each of these represent different categories of assets, or important resources in the community. The community capitals framework is similar to PYD, as it takes the strengths-based approach and applies it more broadly to the assets that

exist in communities. Communities, like youth, are most often viewed in terms of their deficits. The community capitals framework in contrast recognizes the people, places, and skills that add value to communities, and attempts to utilize those as a launching point in development efforts (Green & Haines, 2012). Highlighting their strengths empowers community members to act as involved agents of change in the same way that PYD empowers youth to become active participants in their own development.

However, youth do not inherently have access to community capital due to their age and status. As a result, adults hold an important responsibility to help connect youth to valuable community resources which ensure their opportunities to grow and thrive (Green & Haines, 2012).

Finally, we utilized the concept of the “Five C’s”- competence, character, connections, confidence, and contribution, as outlined by Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). The Five C’s provide a summary of the desired outcomes for youth when they gain protective factors and move toward thriving behavior (Hamilton et al., 2004). The Five C’s framework draws connections between positive youth development/the developmental assets framework and the community capitals framework, as it describes tangible action steps that allow both youth and communities to thrive.

Methods (Purpose & Objectives)

This study was created to explore the themes previously outlined regarding youth involvement in communities and the concept of youth voice. Researchers sought to challenge the adult dominated model that often happens in communities by creating contexts for youth to voice their ideas, issues, passions, and relationships. We wanted to gain insight about the specific ways youth view and engage with their communities and learn about the ideas and perspectives they have when given a platform to share their voices.

We outlined 3 major objectives based on broad categories of information we hoped to learn from youth:

1. Explore the **roles** of youth in community organizations and in their community as a whole.
2. Explore the peer to peer and youth to adult **relationships** that exist and the linkages between these relationships and Positive Youth Development.
3. Identify specific **issues, assets, and opportunities** that youth and adults observe in their communities and the similarities and differences between these two perspectives.

In order to collect this data, we facilitated focus groups with youth ages 10-17 in the Weinland Park community. We worked with Franklin County Extension personnel to identify appropriate locations to explain the project’s purpose and recruit youth to participate. These included the Schoenbaum Family Center, which provides early childhood education and other family programming; Godman Guild, which focuses on career readiness with teens and young adults; and the Weinland Park Civic Association, which meets regularly to discuss issues and upcoming events in the community. All three of these are located directly in Weinland Park, as we hoped to make participation in the project accessible and convenient for local families. Families in each

location were given the opportunity to sign up for one of two focus groups, held at a later date in the same locations. Both parental consent and youth assent forms were collected before youth participated in the study.

During the focus groups, researchers served as moderators, utilizing a semi-structured outline, which allowed for flexibility and additional questions based on youths' responses. Youth were asked questions about activities they love to do, leaders and role models in their lives, dreams and goals for the future, their ideas for the best youth program they could imagine, challenges they observe in their community, and things they love about their community. Researchers primarily utilized open-ended questions, as these questions tend to elicit more creative responses from youth (Ferrari & Turner, 2006).

A worksheet with photos and activities was used to help guide the verbal discussion. Activities conducted during the focus groups were hands-on and engaging and encouraged youth to creatively think beyond their verbal answers. Questions for both types of data collection were designed using principles of positive youth development, the community capitals framework, and the Five C's.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and researchers utilized both the transcriptions and the written responses provided by youth during activities in the data analysis. Researchers worked together to develop open coding categories to quantify different types of responses that youth gave. Qualitative anecdotes were also collected for support.

Findings

Through our discussions with youth, we gained insight about their favorite activities, relationships, community perceptions, and future goals and aspirations.

Youth from our focus groups identified hands-on activities, including cooking/baking, art, singing, dancing, science experiments, playing musical instruments, and sports most often as their sparks. Broad categories that were cited most often in terms of youth sparks were arts, technology, and athletics. The most common answer by far as to why youth enjoy these activities was that "they make me happy".

Although the majority of youth from the focus groups cited activities including school work, family time, and other youth organizations as things that they do after school, a few said that they are home alone or "it depends on the day". Youth said their favorite subject in school is science, followed by math and art. When youth were asked, "If you could be anything when you grow up, what would you want to be?", their answers included a forensic scientist, a teacher, a welder, an artist, a dancer, and criminal justice.

We also asked youth about the best activities they could imagine doing in this new 4-H program, and their answers included sports competitions, game design/gaming, outdoor activities, cooking, science experiments, movies, welding, learning other languages, arts and crafts, and music. We also learned a lot about youth relationships through our focus group discussions. When youth were asked to identify leaders and positive role models, the most common answer was "my mother", followed by no role model, and less common answers were teachers, other family

members, and coaches. One male youth responded, “I don’t look up to really anybody. I’d rather create my own path instead of having somebody else’s already made”.

Youth gave similar responses when asked who they can go to when they’re having a bad day, although two youth said, “I go to my room”. When youth were asked who listens to their ideas, the most common answer was “my mother”, followed by nobody, with other family members, teachers, coaches, and peers listed as less common responses. Multiple youth indicated during the discussion that they do not speak with their parents or other adults on a regular basis.

Youth were also asked about their perspectives on leadership, and described leaders as people who are intelligent, driven, independent, resilient, inspiring, determined, perseverant, and kind. When asked to describe leaders in their lives, one female youth said, “I feel like my mother has used her intelligence and her drive to get around obstacles and still push forward to what she wants to do”. One male youth said an important quality of leadership is “the determination not to give up”. A third female youth said, “My mother is a leader because she owns her own business and works by herself”.

Finally, we asked youth about positive aspects and issues in their community, as well as ways that they would like to help the community. When asked what they love about their community during the discussion, youth said:

- Nothing (5) (“I don’t live in a good community”) (“No, there’s not a single thing”)
- Restaurants (5)
- My house (3)
- Youth programs (2)
- Accessibility (2) (“The fact that everything is in walking distance, like Kroger is down the street and there’s childcare centers, a church, an after-school program –there’s lots of stuff around here”)
- The people (2) (“The people. I feel like they’re willing to help. I don’t know if everybody’s community is where if you need some help, you have a neighbor willing to help you”)
- Recreation center (1) (“The park! Thompson Recreation Center. And right next to it is like an aquatic center and a indoor pool that’s open during the winter time. And it’s great!”)

When we asked youth about issues they observe in their community, they talked about trash in the streets/environmental issues, poor communication, a lack of access to opportunities, lack of unity, and violence. Some of their verbal responses are listed below.

- “I look at it like you’re family, so you’re supposed to help your family”
- “I would say communication. I think back to when we first moved down here, there was neighborhood newsletters, and I haven’t seen any more since we first moved down here, but I feel like knowing what’s going on in the community – I just feel like it’s helpful. I feel like they should start doing that again”
- “We don’t get along and there’s fights and stuff”

When asked about their ideas for addressing those issues, youth suggested cleaning up the neighborhood, giving to the needy, promoting non-violence, and promoting unity. Nine youth

said they wanted to do something to help people in their community, and three youth said they did not want to help people in their community. Some of their verbal responses are listed below:

- “Giving food out to the homeless”
- “Give food to poor people, keep the area clean, put up posters about non-violence”
- “Clean up the streets, give away things I don’t want to people who don’t have”
- “My community does not need help at all”
- “I don’t want to help nobody in my community”

From here, we hope to hold follow-up meetings with connections from OSU Extension to discuss our results, and look at next steps for implementation, including curriculum development and forming community collaborations. OSU Extension in Franklin County has already implemented 4-H SPIN clubs on a variety of topics, including urban gardening, technology/robotics, and art.

Although some of this material may be able to be re-used, researchers feel it is important for activities to be adapted as necessary to best fit the youth in Weinland Park. Community collaborations will also be of extreme significance moving forward. We will need to reach out to local schools and community hubs, like the Schoenbaum Family Center and Godman Guild, in hopes of securing a space for the program and ensuring that programming supports existing programs, and to explore possible partners for pursuing embedded programs in the early stages of the 4-H club. In addition, we hope to explore the possibility of forming partnerships with the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership. We feel that these kinds of partnerships could benefit college students through the provision of internships and volunteer experiences, and also would benefit youth through their experiences with collegiate and professional mentors.

Discussion & Recommendations

Based on our observations, we recognized that many of the foundational aspects of 4-H align with the needs and interests of the youth we spoke with in Weinland Park, and we predict that these indicators would look similar in other urban settings. For example,

- Youth identified hands-on activities as “sparks” that they love and want to learn more about, which aligns with 4-H’s “learn by doing” motto
- 4-H emphasizes the role of positive adult mentors in the lives of youth, which youth in this area may benefit from, particularly those who indicated that they do not currently have a positive role model in their lives
- In addition, the 4-H model incorporates each of the Five C’s relating to positive youth development, and thus may be a promising option for moving youth toward thriving behavior in both rural and urban settings
 - *Competence- Youth gain competence as they learn skills through group and individual activities that can be applied to a variety of potential career areas.*
 - *Character- Positive character traits, including honesty, integrity, patience, and effort, are emphasized through 4-H activities.*
 - *Connections- Youth gain connections to adult mentors through program leaders and volunteers, as well as other youth participating in the program.*

- *Confidence- Youth gain confidence as they learn to communicate the work that they're doing in the program to peers, club leaders, parents, and the larger community.*
- *Contribution- Community service is a major focus of 4-H programs, and youth learn how to turn their ideas about giving back into actions.*

We also confirmed our hypotheses that youth are active, perceptive members of their communities, and that they offer meaningful ideas about serving their community, as well as their future aspirations, when given a voice to share those ideas. We were enlightened by the depth of their responses, and felt they made an excellent case for a greater emphasis on youth voice in communities and organizations.

Principles of the 4-H model align with the urban community we worked with in a variety of ways. However, in order for 4-H to be fully effective in urban areas, there are some important adjustments that need to be made from the traditional model. For example, community partnerships are of extreme importance in this context as they can open the doors for embedded programming opportunities to introduce 4-H to communities that have no prior experience. These may include partnerships with schools, other youth organizations, and key community leaders- all of which are part of the community capitals framework. Embedded programs are not a typical model for 4-H, but we feel that they may open doors to valuable opportunities to better serve youth in Weinland Park, as well as in other urban settings.

In addition, holding programming during after school hours is particularly beneficial for urban youth. Traditional 4-H programs are often held in the evenings, which gives families time to care for their livestock, eat dinner, etc. However, as previously mentioned, the afternoon hours directly after school present some of the highest risk for urban youth, and in turn, youth programming is often most effective in providing protective factors and mitigating risk when it is offered during this time.

The expansion of 4-H to include urban communities should spark some ideas for change in traditional 4-H curriculum. Urban youth are typically more diverse as a group than youth in traditional 4-H clubs, and thus bring a greater variety of interests, skill sets, and challenges to the table. Books and concepts from rural programs can in many cases be easily adapted to fit a group, after school setting, but in some cases, entirely new material may be necessary. The most important aspect in terms of curriculum development is ensuring that program leaders take the time to hear what youth have to say- to learn about their world, their dreams, their struggles, and how to serve them best. The model utilized here is easily replicable, and would likely elicit slightly different responses in every community, depending on the specific youth that live there.

Staff training and continued education are also of major importance for urban 4-H programs to prove relevant for the youth they serve. Urban youth face a variety of challenges and risk factors that may differ from those of rural youth and can benefit greatly from having a caring adult role model to guide them through those challenges. However, in order for this relationship to have any merit for youth, adult mentors must genuinely understand what youth are going through and be trained to serve them appropriately (Kerrigan, 2007). These adjustments to the traditional 4-H model are no small feat, and bring a variety of challenges, including securing funding for a lesser

known program in urban settings, sustaining recruitment and retention, and proving significance to funders in the midst of a major programmatic shift.

Although some communities and organizations are starting to come together to meet the needs of urban youth, many gaps still exist. According to a report from After School Alliance, only 8.4 million school-aged youth (15%) participate in after school programs, and an additional 18.5 million say they would participate if a quality program were available in their community (After School Alliance, 2009). In addition, issues of transportation, lack of interest, and high exposure to risk, among others, remain major obstacles for the sustained participation of urban youth in youth development programs. It's important to acknowledge these barriers and intentionally seek solutions by re-imagining 4-H in a way that best fits youth outside of the traditional 4-H setting. Our youth and communities are changing, and any youth development programs that are going to remain significant during this demographic shift will need to follow suit.

Finally, we believe that adults play a major role in filling the gaps and offering youth a platform to share their ideas, as well as connections to valuable resources that can further their development. When this collaboration happens, it allows the opportunity for youths' ideas to become a reality, and programs to be transformed for the better.

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Name: _____

Age: _____

School: _____

<p>1 I love to...</p>	<p>2 The coolest thing I can imagine doing at the club is...</p>
<p>3 Skills or characteristics of my leader...</p>	<p>4 I want to help people in my community by...</p>

Anything else you want to share:

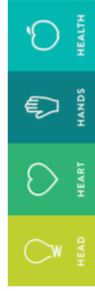
Exploring the Roles of Youth in Community Programming and Their Connections to Positive Youth Development and Involvement in Community

Courtney Fulton, Dr. Mary Rodriguez, & Dr. Jera Niewoehner-Green

BACKGROUND

Youth are often overlooked in the planning and development of community projects. Decisions are typically left to adult community leaders, without the influence of "youth voice".

- Youth offer unique, valuable perspectives, and failure to include them creates an inaccurate representation of the community (Wang & Burns, 1997).
- Youth have "sparks", or passions that excite them, but only about 1/3 of youth feel that their sparks are understood by adults (Scales, 2010).
- Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a research-based strategy that has been proven to benefit youth as they build and acquire developmental assets (Catalano, et al., 2004).
- PYD emphasizes youth empowerment and engagement in decision making.
- Youth who are challenged to engage in their communities improve in self-esteem and self-efficacy and gain connections to community capital, which contributes to their future success (Hamilton, et al., 2004).
- Communities benefit from youth involvement as well, as they gain a greater understanding of issues facing youth as well as valuable skills, talents, and perspectives that youth bring to the table.



PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the needs, interests, and role models of local youth as well as the unique ways that they view their community. Extension professionals hope to implement 4-H clubs in this area, and this project was created to inform the design of those youth programs. Specifically, we hope to:

- Explore the **roles** of youth in community organizations and in their community as a whole
- Explore the youth to youth and youth to adult **relationships** that exist and the connections between these relationships and Positive Youth Development
- Identify specific **issues, assets, and opportunities** that youth and adults observe in their communities and the similarities and differences between these two perspectives

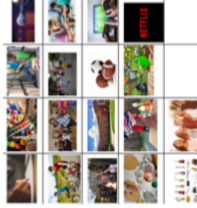
METHODS

Participants

This was a qualitative research study, and data was collected through focus groups with youth ages 10-17 in the Weinland Park community.

Locations

- Godman Guild
 - Schoenbaum Family Center
- Locations were chosen based on proximity and were strategically planned at times when youth were already gathered to minimize transportation and other barriers.



As part of five focus group activities, youth were asked to identify activities that they love to do by gluing them on to a sheet of drawing their own.

Data Collection

Activities conducted during the focus groups were hands-on and engaging, and encouraged youth to creatively reflect beyond their verbal answers. Researchers analyzed both recordings of the focus group discussion and written/illustrated responses that youth provided during the activities.



RESULTS & DISCUSSION

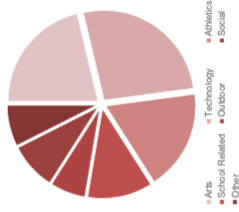
- Youth enjoy hands on activities like cooking/baking, art, singing, dancing, science experiments, playing musical instruments, and sports.
- Youth identified activities under the broad categories of art, technology, and athletics as "sparks" more often than any other categories.
- Youth notice issues in their community, including a lack of opportunities, poor communication, violence, and environmental concerns.
- Youth want to participate in activities that have less structure and more variety than school.
- Some youth could not name a positive role model in their lives.
- Youth have dreams for their futures and specific ideas for addressing the issues that they observe in their community.

Youth say that leaders are...



4-H is an international youth organization that empowers young people to become leaders in their communities by practicing youth development through mentoring and leadership training and the use of the 4-H emblem. The 4-H emblem is a symbol of youth development and is used by 4-H clubs and leaders worldwide. The 4-H emblem is a symbol of youth development and is used by 4-H clubs and leaders worldwide.

Youth Sparks - Broad Categories



IMPLICATIONS

- Youth in this area may benefit from mentor relationships provided by the 4-H model
- Youth identified hands-on activities as "sparks" that they love and want to learn more about, which aligns with 4-H's "learn by doing" motto
- Youth are active, perceptive members of their communities
- Youth contribute and articulate meaningful ideas about serving their communities and about their future aspirations
- **We believe that these ideas hold immense potential, especially when youth are given a voice. We also believe that adults serve as critical connectors between youth and community resources in order to help these ideas become a reality.**

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